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## URBAN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AS “AFRICAN POTENTIALS”: THE CASE OF YAOUNDÉ, CAMEROON

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**ABSTRACT** This article examined several practices employed by urban voluntary associations in Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon, to promote coexistence with Bamileke immigrants from the western half of the West Region of Cameroon, where the territory is divided into more than 100 small chiefdoms. Bamileke immigrants residing in cities organize hometown associations among those who have emigrated from the same chiefdom; even after relocation, these immigrants maintain their identity as members of particular chiefdoms. I surveyed the non-elite hometown associations of a chiefdom in Yaoundé and analyzed how the members perform mutual aid activities within their associations and how they maintain their position within the city. The ability of Bamileke hometown associations to have survived in cities for approximately one century indicates they have adapted to the surrounding social, economic, and political environments. Although Bamileke hometown associations experience conflict when political struggles occur, members have employed various approaches to maintaining their community. This ability to introduce different values and organizations into a community is an expression of “African potential” in urban society. The non-elite Bamileke hometown associations survive in the city by maintaining the core activities of mutual help and using a variety of methods to subsume differences.

**Key Words:** African urban society; Hometown association; Mutual aid; Bamileke; Cameroon.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sub-Saharan Africa has experienced rapid urbanization. Although most African cities are multi-ethnic, religiously and linguistically plural societies, the residents of African cities manage to avoid conflicts and live together, which raises questions about how this situation is maintained. This paper discusses several practices employed by urban voluntary associations in Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon, to promote a peaceful coexistence.

People in Yaoundé are willing to connect with others for various purposes. Many traditions and institutions facilitate the establishment and maintenance of these relationships, including family ties, commercial networks, and voluntary associations. Although the applicability of the “African potential” framework is broad, this paper focuses on “the willingness” and these “institutions” (or the voluntary associations I will discuss) as forms of African potential. The notion of African potential is sometimes regarded as coextensive with the African “tradition” or African culture. Indeed, the African potential is sometimes regarded as identical to the “African tradition” or the “African culture.” However, according to Matsuda (2014), the African potential does not involve valuing or reviving

traditional African ideas; instead, it involves the dynamism borne of Africa's long-term confrontations and negotiations with outside actors. Given this perspective, it is important to assess the role of the voluntary associations in Africa as examples of the African potential by considering the history, power relationships, and national politics involving these organizations and their members.

African voluntary associations have been studied since the 1940s (cf. Guilbot, 1947) and have flourished since the 1950s (cf. Banton, 1956; Epstein, 1958). At that time, "tribal associations" or "ethnic associations," whose memberships were limited to individuals coming from the same region or belonging to the same ethnic group, were examined because of their prevalence in many African cities. At the same time, these associations were identified as ways to bridge the cultural gap between cities and villages and the structural gap between large urban structures and the urban lifestyles of migrants, thereby helping migrants adapt to new circumstances (cf. Banton, 1956; Little, 1957; Southall, 1961). Yet, these groups have also been seen as obstacles to national unity. However, the so-called super-tribalism that has intensified in cities is not the same as the tribalism in villages. Whereas Gluckman (1961) argued that, unlike its counterpart in rural areas, tribalism serves little political purpose in the city, Cohen (1969) maintained that tribalism serves political and economic interests in an urban context.

Since the 1980s, the role of civil society in Africa has been the focus of increasing discussion, and studies have examined the relationships of associations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the role of associations in democratic systems (Rothchild & Chazan, 1988; Bratton, 1989a; 1989b; Kasfir, 1998; Tvedt, 1998). According to Tostensen, "[T]he terms civil society and associational life have been used interchangeably to denote the general phenomenon" (Tostensen et al., 2001: 14). However, "tribal associations," later known as hometown associations,<sup>(1)</sup> did not initially attract significant attention. Since the 1990s, several scholars have evaluated hometown associations in the context of national politics, focusing on the role of the elites. For example, Trager (1998; 2001) discussed the relationship between rural and urban associations, focusing on the Yoruba society, elites, and "the home" in a Nigerian context and pointing out that hometown associations support the "multilocality" of people in migrant societies.

Recently, the hometown associations in Cameroon have attracted the attention of scholars, who have been focusing on the "politics of belonging," represented by an increasing obsession with who is the "autochthon" and who is the "stranger" in regions that have become new sources of power in Cameroonian national politics (Geschiere & Gugler, 1998; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2001). In this context, hometown associations have become one of the resources that elites manipulate for political gain (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 1998; Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998; Page et al., 2010; Evans, 2010).<sup>(2)</sup> This situation is particularly relevant to the hometown associations in the western part of Cameroon, including the Northwest, Southwest, and West Regions discussed in this study.

Recent studies have elucidated the role of urban elites, the dynamics between

national and local politics, and the new realities concerning hometown associations in Cameroon. However, as Feldman-Savelsberg & Ndonko (2010: 371) noted, “... the political implications of hometown associations may be due to the neglect of both non-elite and women’s hometown associations.” Although (male) elites are important agents in hometown associations and the activities of associations often extend to rural development, until now, their main activity since the early 20th century had been mutual aid. Thus, researchers should also focus on the self-help activities of associations and the internal difficulties within the context of national politics. In this study, I surveyed non-elite hometown associations related to a village in the West Region of Yaoundé and analyzed their ability to engage in mutual-aid activities and maintain their position within the city despite difficulties within the associations.

## BAMILEKE IMMIGRANTS

There are approximately 200 ethnic groups in Cameroon. These groups gather in large cities such as Yaoundé, which has a population of more than two million, many of whom are immigrants or migrants not only from throughout Cameroon but also from Nigeria, Central Africa, Chad, and other countries. Yaoundé contains some areas that are populated primarily by a specific ethnic group, but even these include a few members of other groups. Therefore, almost all areas are multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-national.

Cameroon has one city that is larger than Yaoundé, the port city of Douala. Douala is sometimes referred to as Cameroon’s economic capital, and Yaoundé is often called its political capital. Yaoundé is the center of Cameroonian politics, and its population includes many civil servants. Positions as civil servants are highly sought after, and civil servants are well-respected in the community despite receiving poor wages for their work. The majority of Yaoundé’s citizens are not civil servants but rather individuals trying to earn a living independently. In this economic context, the Bamileke ethnic group is notable, because many private companies, ranging from small shops to large companies, are operated by Bamileke (Dongmo, 1981; Warnier, 1993), who are known as the “commercial people of Cameroon.”

The Bamileke originated in the Western Region of Cameroon, where the people are divided into more than 100 small chiefdoms that are highly stratified. The Bamileke ethnic group did not even exist until the advent of Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Europeans called them “Bamileke” by borrowing a term from a neighboring ethnic group, and since then people from numerous similar chiefdoms have been grouped together under the rubric of Bamileke. Before the arrival of Europeans, these chiefdoms often fought with one another, sometimes to enlarge their own territory and sometimes to maintain their honor (Warnier, 1995; Tsékénis, 2010). These conflicts among chiefdoms were prohibited by the colonial government in the early 20th century. Therefore, the Bamileke identity is not meaningful at the village level but becomes relevant in cities. Moreover,

Bamileke individuals have retained their identity as members of a particular chiefdom even after they migrate to cities.

The Bamileke region was so densely populated that it served as a main site of labor recruitment for the colonial government, and many young people migrated from villages to urban and plantation areas since the beginning of the 20th century. At first, a majority of these people worked as manual laborers, but they later started small businesses, some emerging as notable businessmen. Their profitable economic activities often led to hostility from other ethnic groups. This “natural” attitude, which has become a political issue known as the “Bamileke problem,”<sup>(3)</sup> is rooted in the history of Cameroon before its independence from France. The movement for independence from the French was started by the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC), a radical nationalist party formed in 1948. As the UPC spread throughout the nation, the colonial government labeled it an ethnic party associated with the Bassa and the Bamileke, and the party was banned in 1955 (Joseph, 1977: 171–176). The UPC then initiated a guerrilla campaign, known as the *maquis*, which later spread to the Bamileke region. This war was also sometimes referred to as the “Bamileke Rebellion.” During this guerrilla war, the Bamileke suffered greatly, despite their support of the UPC. For example, the guerrillas stole their food, and the colonial forces killed them. The UPC’s fight continued after independence and ended with the assassination of one of its leaders in 1971. Prior to independence, the colonial government prevented the Bamileke from gaining power, and post-independence, the Cameroonian government continued this policy of excluding this ethnic group from power, until just recently. Under the regime of President Paul Biya (in power since 1982), the ethnic tensions have intensified owing to the economic crisis in Cameroon, the structural adjustment programs implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in the 1980s, and the introduction of multipartism in the 1990s (cf. Nyamnjoh, 1999; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2001). Thus, the position of the Bamileke in Cameroon has always been precarious.

## BAMILEKE IN CITIES

On the other hand, the Bamileke have been able to maintain their economic power. Bamileke immigrants bought land and expanded their businesses throughout the country. However, this sometimes led to conflicts with the local people. It is said that dozens or several hundred Bamileke were killed by locals in Tombel, which contained many Bamileke immigrants, in 1966. Even now, the Bamileke population in this area, which is situated between the Bamileke region and Douala, is extremely large. Nevertheless, since then, such severe violence has not recurred in the areas to which the Bamileke have migrated.

The Bamileke are especially numerous in cities such as Yaoundé and Douala. Despite the Bamileke’s apparent status as the largest ethnic group in these cities, no major ethnic conflicts have occurred. However, as mentioned above, the

“politics of belonging” has led to tension between autochthons and migrants in cities, notably Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon (Socpa, 2010). In 1991, during the “Ghost Town” (*Villes Mortes*) Campaign, which was an attempt to paralyze the government through actions such as tax resistance and a transportation strike in response to its refusal to implement multiparty procedures, a mob attacked several stores and gas stations operated by the Bamileke in these cities. Additionally, local youth living in a new residential area in Yaoundé in which many Bamileke constructed houses protested the presence of the newcomers by shouting “invaders!” and “land thieves!” and throwing stones at their houses and cars (Socpa, 2010; 563–566).

One context for these conflicts is the enthusiasm of the Bamileke for urban real estate. Indeed, when Bamileke migrants save any amount of money, they invest it in real estate (Dongmo, 1981: 238). The “autochthonous” people of Douala and Yaoundé are sometimes called “the vendors of the land,” and “the buyers” are primarily Bamileke. Although the government sometimes buys land from locals at low prices and sells it to the Bamileke at high prices, there are many rumors that the Bamileke steal land from naive locals through deceit. The situation is the same in Douala, and a local Duala chief has been quoted as saying, “[T]he Bamileke have the land, and the Duala have the soil” (Socpa, 2010: 556). This statement expresses both their self-confidence as “autochthones” as well as their frustration at being obliged to sell their ancestral land to the Bamileke.

Some of the Bamileke are proud of their contribution to the development of the cities and express their irritation at the local people: “Who built Yaoundé or Douala? It’s not the Ewondo, nor the Duala, but we, the Bamileke.” Thus, they are proud of their economic contribution to Cameroon, but they feel a bit like “strangers” even though they have lived in the cities for a long time (cf. Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998). The current state of affairs, in which the economic activities of the Bamileke are not impeded so long as they stay out of politics, has lasted for a long time. However, they sometimes attempt to express their own political will, as in the presidential election of 1992. At that time, the Bamileke and Anglophones were the main supporters of John Fru Ndi of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the largest opposition party in Cameroon. However, as Bayart (1985) pointed out, Bamileke entrepreneurs and politicians had formed a political alliance, and a group of famous Bamileke entrepreneurs chose to endorse the incumbent President and the ruling party *Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais* (RDPC). The alliance between the Bamileke entrepreneurs and the ruling party was sealed in the 1990s, but this relationship became public in the 2000s, when several prominent Bamileke entrepreneurs were elected as mayors of their hometowns as candidates of the RDPC (Arriola, 2013: 163–164). In the presidential election of 2004, several Bamileke entrepreneurs publicly expressed their support for President Biya, explaining that Cameroon would be peaceful as long as Biya stayed in power, emphasizing that this was important for their businesses (Arriola, 2013: 166–167).

## BAMILEKE HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS

As mentioned above, the position of the Bamileke in cities is not stable. It is possible that the Bamileke create hometown communities<sup>(4)</sup> with people who originate from the same chiefdom (village) to protect themselves politically. In contrast with the situation of associations in villages, membership in hometown associations is voluntary in cities. However, many people elect to participate in such associations when they have a steady income, because the associations are the core of their community.

The Bamileke hometown associations in Yaoundé started approximately the beginning of the 20th century, after the “West Province” association drew all the Bamileke to Yaoundé for an assembly. In the 1940s, they divided the association into five different associations representing each of the five sections of the West Region. In the 1950s, the associations were again divided into groups that represented each of the chiefdoms in the Bamileke region. Indeed, it is said that each Bamileke chiefdom has a hometown association in a large city such as Yaounde. Since 1960, additional associations have been created based on the subdivisions within chiefdoms.

In this paper, I examined the case of the P chiefdom hometown community. The P chiefdom, a small village located in the southwestern part of the Bamileke region (the western half of the West Region), has a population of approximately 6,000 (1995) and covers an area of 54 km<sup>2</sup>. As in other Bamileke villages, people engage in agricultural activities, cultivating cocoyam, plantains, cassava, taro, and other crops for self-consumption and coffee, cacao, among others as cash crops. Some residents raise livestock, such as hogs, goats, and chicken. Nevertheless, their main survival strategy involves moving to cities such as Yaoundé and Douala. The youth, in particular, now live outside P village, and the rate of depopulation is increasing. After their relocation to the cities, these individuals form communities and associations.

In Yaoundé, all those who are from P or who have parents from P are presumed to be members of the P community. However, participation in self-help activities is restricted to members of an association in the P community. That is, as with other Bamileke communities, associations are at the core of the P chiefdom community. The most important association is *Manjo* (the warrior’s group), which any male from the P chiefdom can join if permitted. The *Kenaada* (walk elegantly) is available to females from the P chiefdom. Additionally, 14 associations are based on regions within the P chiefdom, and eight additional associations are for students, elites, young merchants, and the local royal family, among others. These associations have different meeting days to accommodate the schedules of those belonging to multiple associations.

In this way, the associations related to the P chiefdom vary greatly, and these associations are not considered to be equal in stature within the community (cf. Feldman-Savelsberg & Ndonko, 2010). For example, membership in the most important association, *Manjo*, is equivalent to gaining admission to the center of P community politics. However, associations based on region have a familial



atmosphere. Selection of an association depends on an individual’s ambition and relationships in the community.

The Bamileke hometown community includes various individuals from the community—those from different regions of a chiefdom, men and women, nobles and commoners, rich and poor, old and young, educated and uneducated, and so on. Even within a single association, all members are not equal: men are more powerful than women, nobles are more powerful than commoners, the royal family is more powerful than other families, and older individuals are more powerful than younger ones.

The meetings among important associations, such as *Manjo* or *Kenaada*, are usually held once per week, on a Saturday or Sunday. The main activities of Bamileke hometown associations are as follows:

#### Insurance:

The provision of “insurance” is the most important function of the associations. In the case of the death of an association member or of a relative of a member, a fixed amount of money, calculated according to a rule, is paid to the beneficiary. In the women’s association, *Kenaada*, the insurance payment was 130,000 *Communauté Financière Africaine* (CFA) francs (approximately 260 USD) for the death of a member, and 8,000 CFA francs (approximately 16 USD) were collected each year as premiums. Many associations treat premiums as membership fees, and 8,000 CFA francs are collected as premiums at meetings; this amount can be paid in one or several installments. For example, the salary of a junior high school graduate working as a civil servant is 61,200 CFA francs (as of 1998); in this context, an insurance payment of 130,000 CFA francs is a large amount. When a family member dies, it is customary to send the body home for burial, and the insurance system covering the urban Bamileke plays an important role in paying this cost. Even though this insurance payment is sometimes referred to as “money of coffin,” the recipient can use this money freely.

#### Rotating Savings and Credit Association: ROSCA (*Tontine*):

This system is known as a *tontine* (or *cotisation*) in Francophone Cameroon, but this term does not literally mean “association”; instead, it refers to an arrangement involving rotating savings and credit. Indeed, *tontines* support the businesses of the Bamileke in Cameroon. Although they assume a variety of forms, members of a *tontine* generally make monetary contributions at fixed intervals (weekly, monthly, etc.) and take turns receiving the total or a portion of the amount collected. *Tontines* are indispensable to hometown associations. In many associations, participation in a *tontine* is obligatory, and each meeting begins with business related to the *tontine*. This practice was designed to prevent members from arriving late to the meeting, as a fine is imposed for being late to a *tontine*.

Everybody accepts that “A hometown association without a *tontine* is impossible.” This is because “no one would consider attendance at a meeting



to be an important obligation if there were no *tontine*.” Although people do not gather because of the *tontine*, they will not gather without it. The structure of *tontines* provides stability.

#### Banking (*Bank*):

Like an actual bank, these institutions allow members to save money at their own discretion, and their account matures once each year. Some associations lend the deposited amount with interest and then, upon maturation of the savings account, the interest collected is divided among the depositors. The due dates are usually around Christmas or the beginning of a new school term. Participation is not obligatory, such that the association “banks” are not as important as *tontines* or the insurance system, serving as only an indirect method of mutual assistance.

#### Participation in Funeral Services:

This is also very important for hometown associations. All members participate in the funeral services of the members of the association. They accompany the body as it is transported from the mortuary and participate in the subsequent vigil. When the body is carried to a village and buried, some members are sent as representatives of the association (the association pays the members’ transportation and other expenses). Furthermore, members participate in festive funeral ceremonies, called *funérailles* in French, which are held several months or years after a death. All members of the association are expected to attend *funérailles* held in Yaoundé, and a fine is imposed in the case of absence. Everyone wears his or her own “uniform” and dances at the *funérailles*. Dancing is absolutely necessary on this occasion, as it is thought to be of great help to the bereaved and the dead. Thus, associations also function as dance groups.

#### Development Committee:

The activities of hometown associations involve not only city dwellers but also chiefdoms and chiefs. Each hometown community also organizes a development committee to construct primary schools, roads, and other structures within its hometown (chiefdom).

Additionally, hometown associations engage in rivalries through which the Bamileke urban community contributes most to the development of its village, constructs the most palatial residences, and produces more entrepreneurs, as examples. These rivalries originate among the Bamileke residents of large cities.

## DIVISION AND REUNIFICATION OF THE P COMMUNITY

As noted in a prior chapter, individuals participate in the activities of each association on a weekly basis and sometimes cooperate to solve problems that arise in Yaoundé or the P chiefdom. Indeed, serious conflicts occur occasionally in the community within the P chiefdom. It is said that all urban Bamileke

communities have their own “family chief” who is the representative of the community. He is considered the most authoritative person in the city.

In the case of the P hometown community of Yaoundé, the first family chief was appointed in 1960 by a noble who lived in Yaoundé. The first chief was also a noble, and he held this position until his death in 1968. The second family chief was another noble appointed by the nobles of Yaoundé. However, the third family chief was elected in 1994 by the people of the P hometown community in Yaoundé after obtaining the permission of the village chief; it was said of this that “democracy had arrived.” This “democratization” was related to the Cameroonian political situation in the 1990s, as the first multi-party presidential election was held in 1992. Moreover, the community set a term limit of five years for a family chief. However, it was possible to extend this term if the nobles approved of his work, reflecting the continuation of the traditional authority of this group in the city. Thus, the new procedures and ideas of democracy were incorporated into the community, but respect for traditional authority was also maintained.

At the time of the first election of a family chief in 1994, major conflicts erupted in the P hometown community because one party did not agree to the election and wanted to retain the incumbent family chief. Ultimately, an election was held, and a new family chief was chosen. However, the loser and his followers did not accept the new family chief, thus dividing the P hometown community into two groups. Furthermore, the most important association, *Manjo*, was also divided along these lines. As a result, the women’s association, *Kenaada*, was divided as well owing to conflicts among the members’ husbands.

This unfortunate situation persisted for four to five years, until the representatives of the two sides discussed the issue and decided to assemble a “General Council of the P community of Yaoundé” to supercede the authority of the *Manjo*. This council consisted of representatives from the 26 associations of the P community and was designed to solve problems within the community. Although two *Manjo* and two *Kenaada* still exist under the pretext of accessibility, they operate within the framework of the General Council, which continues to perform community work.

## ASSOCIATIONS AND WOMEN

Surprisingly, P hometown associations are composed not only of individuals from P chiefdoms. When I asked committee members about membership criteria, some answered that, “*tout le monde*” (anybody) can join the association. In fact, although many people with no relationship to the P chiefdom do not join, some members who are not from the P chiefdom themselves join because they have friends within the associations. Moreover, many female members of the association are not from the P chiefdom. This is possible because Bamileke women can belong to both her chiefdom of origin and the chiefdom of her husband. That is, if a man from the P chiefdom marries a woman from another

ethnic group, she can belong to a P hometown association as a wife of a member of the P chiefdom. For example, a Bassa woman married to a man from the P chiefdom is a committee member of *Kenaada*.

Interestingly, these two categories of women have different titles within the association: “daughters” come from P and “wives” have husbands from P. They even sit in separate designated sections at *Kenaada* meetings. When a woman is both the daughter and the wife of men from P, her role as wife takes priority over her role as daughter, because the position of a wife is considered more important in this cultural context. For example, a daughter is not allowed to be an executive member of *Kenaada* because she might leak the secrets of the association to her husband who may not be from P. Therefore, the husband’s roots are more important than are her own. However, because they represent “husband” in the *Kenaada*, the daughters are respected by the wives. For instance, wives serve food to daughters during meetings. The Bamileke women change their position and attitude depending on the kinds of associations to which they belong.

Thus, P hometown associations comprise people not only from the P chiefdom but also from other chiefdoms and sometimes include those from other ethnic groups. In other words, these associations span chiefdoms and ethnic groups. This composition will be sustained in the future due to the increasing number of intermarriages in Yaoundé. This kind of openness, achieved via the role of women, is important because these family ties facilitate coexistence in a multi-ethnic, urban context.

## CONTEXT OF URBAN HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS

This section examines the context of urban hometown associations. Specifically, it explores how other people in Yaoundé view the Bamileke hometown associations. Indeed, the Bamileke hometown associations may be one of the reasons this group is viewed as a “single homogeneous entity.” Yaoundé people are familiar with seeing Bamileke *funérailles* organized by hometown associations, as these occur almost every weekend in every corner of the city. Thus, it is not surprising that outsiders perceive the Bamileke as a very united ethnic group. However, although outsiders cannot distinguish these hometown associations from one another (as there are over 100 chiefdoms), the Bamileke gather and participate in the activities of hometown associations not as Bamileke but individuals from P (a chiefdom) or sometimes from L (a section) of P (a chiefdom), and so on. Feldman-Savelsberg & Ndonko (2010: 374) noted, “Bamileke hometown associations are an important arena in which a sense of Bamileke-ness is cultivated,” but in this case, it is the *village-ness* (*chiefdom-ness*) or sometimes *section-ness* that is cultivated in P hometown associations. Moreover, as mentioned above, the Bamileke people create rivalries within the larger Bamileke community through the hometown associations, and this sense of *village-ness* is strong among the Bamileke, even in cities.

However, despite the diversity within the Bamileke people, a monolithic image is imposed on them by outsiders. In ordinary life, they do not have enough time to confront such political Bamileke-ness, because they are busy making a living and participating in the activities of hometown associations, as stated above. That is, by cultivating their *village-ness*, they can avoid encountering such a politically constructed identity. In other words, the Bamileke exist in a state between homogeneity—the appearance of a monolithic Bamileke identity—and heterogeneity within their own hometown or the larger Bamileke community. Survival in the city as a Bamileke involves embracing this dualism.

It is important to examine whether Bamileke hometown associations can remain outside the realm of national politics. It has been argued that the associations are sometimes “vulnerable to hijacking by political elites, turning networks from social capital into ‘political capital’” (Meagher, 2005: 232). In fact, Bamileke associations are sometimes forced to participate in national politics, because these associations are potentially fertile sources of votes. In the case of the P community, one politician from Cameroon’s ruling party visited the P hometown associations before the elections. The politician was welcomed to these meetings, and some association members took the opportunity to petition the politician regarding various issues. However, the visit did not persuade the members to vote for the politician’s party. As is often emphasized, the hometown associations are apolitical institutions. They welcomed the politician, because it would have sent a political statement if they had refused a visit from a politician associated with the ruling party. Although they may be exploited by national politicians, their prudent attitude toward politics protects them from bribery and intrigue.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined associations in Yaoundé through a case study of the urban Bamileke community. This kind of non-elite hometown community and association may seem traditional and outdated. However, the fact that these hometown associations have survived in cities for about a century demonstrates that they have adapted to the surrounding social, economic, and political environments. I clarified that the non-elite Bamileke hometown associations survive in the city by maintaining their core activities of mutual aid and by subsuming various differences.

The main activity of non-elite Bamileke associations involves offering services in the forms of insurance, *tontines*, and funeral services. Compared with the activities of the Development Committee, these services are more important for the non-elite members, because they facilitate their survival in the city as well as their ability to establish businesses. To sustain these services and associations, people have used various approaches to maintain their hometown community. For example, members of the P hometown community have borrowed new ideas, such as democracy, to modernize the community, and they created the General

Council to overcome and avoid divisions within the community. This ability to introduce different values and organizational strategies into the community is an expression of the African potential in an urban society.

Additionally, although the Bamileke in Yaoundé seem to be an exclusive and united monolithic group, they are in fact a heterogeneous community. Bamilekeness can be broken down into *village-ness*, *region-ness*, *family-ness*, among others. Moreover, particularly in the case of women's associations, they include members from multiple chiefdoms and sometimes multiple ethnic groups. That is, the Bamileke exist in a state between homogeneity and the heterogeneity, and urban associations enable the Bamileke to embrace this dualism.

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#### NOTES

- (1) "Hometown" refers not only to the "town" of origin but also to the village, district, or region of origin. The hometown associations I studied involved a village, but I used this term to refer to all of these "home village" associations.
- (2) Although a desire for belonging tends to facilitate local conflict, Page noted, "it can also simultaneously be a platform for conviviality" (Page et al., 2010: 364).
- (3) Cameroonian activist Mbuyinga (1989: 129–130) summarized the main idea underlying the "Bamileke problem." The arguments focus on the Bamileke's economic activities and movement throughout Cameroon.
- (4) The term "hometown associations" and "hometown community" are defined as such for the purpose of the research. Members of the community refer to associations by their names. The community, however, has a common name: *La communauté P de Yaoundé* (The P community of Yaoundé) in French.

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